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# Coalition presses for prescription importation vote

The need to control the cost of prescription drugs continues as pharmaceutical companies project major windfalls from the new Medicare prescription drug benefit and President Bush proposes major cuts to Medicare.

While the need for Medicare to negotiate prescription drugs remains, the only immediate viable way that Congress is seriously considering to lower the cost of prescriptions is through importation.

To that end, a grassroots coalition of U.S. consumer organizations is pressing action to lower the cost of prescription drugs through fully legalizing safe importation of prescription drugs by individuals, U.S. wholesalers and pharmacies. In late January, leadership from the Minnesota Senior Federation and its allies met with Congressional leadership including Minnesota Sen. Mark Dayton and Representatives Gil Gutknecht, Betty McCollum and Jim Ramstad, in Washington.

Congressional staff of senators Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) and Byron Dorgan (D-Maine) reported at the meeting that Dorgan-Snowe-Vitter bi-partisan prescription drug proposals and amendments for a safer medication supply in the U.S. will also save Americans up to 50 percent on brand-name drugs. It has been heard by a key Senate committee and it is expected to get to the Senate floor this spring.

Congressional staff for Gutknecht, McCollum and Ramstad reported that importation legislation clearly has the support of the majority of representatives but is being blocked by House leadership and the administration. It is hoped that leverage can be found to force a House vote or that Senate-passed legislation will force House action.

In a related development, the federal government has increased seizures of Canadian prescription drugs mail-ordered by Minnesotans through the MnSF program and the state's web site in recent weeks. At its height, no more than 2 percent of prescriptions that had been ordered through the Senior Federation's prescription drug program were seized. Because such seizures are immediately being replaced by the Federation's Canadian pharmacies, it gener-



**MnSF Legislative Director Lee Graczyk (second from right on rear row) joined with coalition members and congressional staff in Washington, D.C., to discuss drug importation.**

risk to American consumers.

In response to this, Ramstad, as chair of the House Ways and Means oversight subcommittee, wrote the commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection a strong letter that in part said, "This heavy-handed practice by customs officials is difficult to understand in light of your policy and the critical need of Minnesota seniors for life-saving prescription drugs at affordable costs."

The national grassroots coalition pressing safer and lower-cost prescription drugs for all Americans is being led by the

National Coalition of Consumer Organizations on Aging, which includes the Minnesota Senior Federation, Medicare Rights Center, Consumers Union, Alliance of Retired Americans, Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, New York Statewide Senior Action Council, Senior Action Network of San Francisco, Senior Action Alliance of Pennsylvania, California Congress of Senior Citizens and United Seniors in Action (Indiana).

Got to [www.mnseniors.org](http://www.mnseniors.org) for more information about these efforts and a call to action.